



# ELSAH HISTORY

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## TELLING ELSAH'S STORIES



*Clockwise from top left: Inge Mack (left) and Genie Keller confirm memories that each has of more than fifty years living in Elsay; Convener Jeff Cowton from Granmere, UK, listens to stories being told by Elsay villagers; Noel (Butch) (left) and Bill Rister, brothers who were born and raised in Elsay in the 1930s and 1940s, following three previous generations; Genie Keller discusses stories with a Principia College facilitator.*

## ***HEF Hosts Storytelling Event to Compile Elsay's Local History***

by George Provenzano

Anyone who has ever lived in a small Midwestern town, population 200 or fewer, knows that cold Friday nights in January are reserved for get-togethers and storytelling. In these places of where everyone-knows-everyone, families and friends gather at church potluck dinners and other informal assemblies to recall and repeat vignettes of holiday celebrations, new jobs, comings-and-goings, marriages, births, and deaths from last week, last summer, and years ago. (cont. on p. 3)



## *The President's Message*

By Tim Tomlinson

I am pleased for this opportunity to tell you about the "state" of Historic Elsah Foundation. By almost any standard, 2015 was a banner year for our historical society. I want to commend the HEF Board for its enthusiasm, support, volunteer efforts, and vision. Our membership is also to be commended for supporting the mission of Historic Elsah Foundation.

We balanced the budget in 2016, something we have done several years in a row, a good sign for an all-volunteer organization with no support from any governmental agency. More, we put the final touches to a Capital Campaign that increasing an Endowment Fund started a few years ago. Our Board understands clearly that, from time to time, unusual and/or significant expenses require large outlays of funds, a daunting prospect within the context of an annual operating budget. Our *Historic Properties* endowment gives us a platform to respond to this type of demand. The Capital

Campaign also made possible the refurbishment of Elsah's historic Ice House and important improvements to Farley's Music Hall, properties for which we have a stewardship obligation.

The *Hosmer-Williams Lecture Series* is, in my view, the best, the most successful free lecture series in the metropolitan St. Louis/Riverbend area. Our lineup for 2015 was outstanding. The theme was primarily Abraham Lincoln, The presentations included talks from a Lincoln scholar with a new book on the 16th president, a folk singer whose persona was that of a Civil War Drummer boy, Lincoln's death and funeral as seen from the eyes of a Civil War Chaplain, and Lincoln in music, a presentation by the Music Director of the Illinois Symphony. We reached out also to new scholarship with a program about a local "lost town" presented by students from Principia College. The *Series*, underwritten principally by Liberty Bank of Godfrey, Illinois, is free and open to the public. All of the presentations were well attended.

Historic Elsah Foundation was the lead organization in the Great Rivers Lincoln Coffin project. The coffin was a central part of ceremonies in Springfield, Illinois on May 2-3, 2016. Other venues included ceremonies at New Piasa Chautauqua and Grafton. We collaborated with the Alton Convention and Visitors Bureau, Lewis and Clark Community College, the Alton Telegraph, and the Alton-Godfrey Rotary Club on a daylong event in Lincoln-Douglas Square that featured the coffin, a Lincoln hearse replica, and several reenactors. The event attracted more than a thousand spectators.

It was a very good year. Witness the award provided by the Alton Convention and Visitors Bureau that is described in this Newsletter. We reinforced existing relationships--Principia, the Village of Elsah, local history societies. We forged new relationships--Abraham Lincoln Library, Lewis and Clark Community College, Alton Little Theater, all new academic collaborations. Financially and programmatically, from a leadership point of view, and from a public service and networking perspective it was a very good year.

Now it's on to 2016...

## *Telling Elsay's Stories*

(cont. from page 1)

If only someone would record these oral fragments; sort them according to past decades; and align them as historians do with major notable events – the Depression, the War, the Great Flood – the layers of a local history would surely emerge from these shared experiences.

And so, on Friday, January 22, over thirty recent and long-time, present and previous inhabitants of Elsay Village met at Farley's Music Hall. They came to contribute extracts of what they saw, felt, and thought about everyday occurrences experienced in growing up, coming of age, marrying, raising families, working, and living in Elsay.

Residents sat at tables of four and five. Signs with proposed topics (village gatherings, building transformations, the Elsay School, holidays in the village) gave a little focus to the discussions. To assist the participants, a student facilitator from Principia College sat at each table, asking an occasional, open-ended question and gently guiding the conversation along. A student typist listened intently, fingers tapping the keyboard of a laptop computer to capture story tellers' words as quickly as they were spoken.

HEF president Tim Tomlinson, Dr. Heidi Snow, Principia College Professor of English Literature, and Jessica Wingert, postgraduate teaching intern, organized this evening of storytelling. They chose the date to coincide with the arrival of Jeff Cowton, Annenberg Scholar at Principia for 2016. Cowton is from Grasmere, UK, where he is Curator for the William Wordsworth Museum and a practitioner of storytelling as a means of generating local history.

Grasmere is a tiny hamlet of approximately 1000 persons in the middle of England's Lake District. Wordsworth (1770-1858), who was a major English poet and helped launch the Romantic Age in English literature, lived in Grasmere from 1799-1898. He was attracted by its natural beauty and peace, and wrote and set much of his greatest poetry there. Each year, thousands of Wordsworth admirers visit Grasmere to acquire a better understanding of how the region influenced his poetry.

In addition to being an expert on the life and works of Wordsworth, Cowton has adapted Wordsworth's poetry and ideas as a means of encouraging residents of small towns to explore and share their 'living history.' Cowton helped establish a Grasmere history group and has encouraged the locals there and in many other communities to embrace storytelling as a means of preserving the past. In his introductory remarks at Farley's Music Hall, Cowton related how he had observed the community storytelling process to be entertaining as well as a means of advancing the idea that nurturing local history is an important and sustainable activity.

The purpose of the storytelling exercise in Elsay is to produce a book of all of the stories from the January session. Ms. Wingert will transform the raw reportage into coherent narratives, which when completed, will be published electronically. The material will also be assembled on a flash drive and given to HEF, who will act as custodian of the public record of what participants said.

These publications will take several months to complete. During this time, additional material may be submitted to Ms. Wingert at Principia College, 1 Maybeck Place, Elsay, Illinois, 62028, or via email to [jessicawingert@principia.edu](mailto:jessicawingert@principia.edu).



## ***Forbes Robertson Remembers Growing up in Elsah***

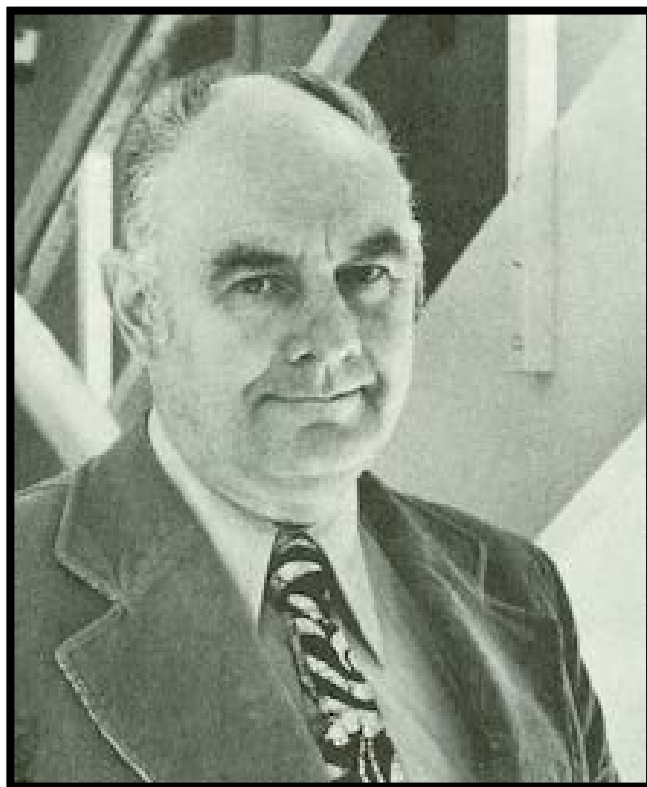
Historic Elsah Foundation has over the years collected a large number of personal reminiscences, like the one that follows by Forbes Robertson. Some of these have been published in previous issues of *Elsah History*. Others remain in our archives, awaiting editing and organization into larger, cohesive narratives.

The following recollections are from a longer memoir that Forbes Robertson composed for HEF around 2004. These sections are printed as they were written with minor punctuation edits. Details that were added, for example, names of persons and places in Elsah, are in [brackets].

### **Introduction**

My parents [Gladys and Percival Robertson] moved from Connecticut to St. Louis in the summer of 1915 when I was a few months old. Over the next several summers, my parents took short vacations in Elsah. My earliest recollections cover this period. They periodically visited Elsah prior to [The] Principia purchasing the land for Principia College in the vicinity of Elsah. We visited Elsah a number of times before the college opened its doors. I was in the move class from St. Louis to Elsah in 1934 and subsequently graduated [from Principia College] in 1938. For about three years, I lived on the college campus and then lived in Elsah from 1959 to 1978. In the intervening and subsequent times, I visited Elsah many times. The incidents in this booklet are the very earliest reminiscences of Elsah that almost nobody else knows about.

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*Geology professor and Elsah resident Forbes Robertson  
(1915-2006).*

### **The Worthy House [Onetto-Bradley House]**

When my parents brought me to Elsah as a very young child, we stayed at the boarding house operated by Mrs. [Mary] Worthy, and it has been The Worthy House to me ever since. It's a three story, brick building set back about a block from the [Mississippi] river on [LaSalle] Street. On entering from the street level, you go down one flight to the dining room and kitchen, or up a flight to the bedrooms. At the very top of the building is a cupola with a fine view of the river. The toilet facilities were on the ground level toward the east end of the property. As I recall, there were a series of four or more doors to the outhouse. There was a well in the kitchen of The Worthy House, but it was considered less palatable than (cont. on page 5)

## ***Reminiscences...***

(cont. from page 4)

the well twenty or thirty feet farther north in the lower floor of the adjacent house owned by Captain Brock. I recall a wooden bucket was dropped into this well, and a crank brought it to the surface, and the Brock water was served for drinking water.

Most of what I know about the food is hearsay from my parents, but The Worthy House meals were highly praised. Always fried chicken on Sunday, and her pies were considered outstanding.

I don't remember much about the rooms except that they were high-ceilinged, and it was a long way up to them for a small tot. I believe inside plumbing came into being, probably in the early 20's. The staircase to the bedroom had a splendid bannister for sliding.

### **Spatz Store [Mott Commercial Building]**

The second structure north from The Worthy House was a frame building in two parts. The northern part was the country store with an ice cream parlor to the south. For many years [in the 1970's], this housed the Elsay Landing Restaurant.

There were two Spatz brothers. One was Alvin [Albert]. I don't remember the name [Edwin] of the other. As you entered the store, there were long counters on either side of the room. The shelves behind were laden with essentials. In front of the counters were a few barrels. I subsequently learned that these contained flour, crackers, and pickles. The Spatz brothers, in my eyes, were very lean old men. The adjoining ice cream parlor was only open in the summer, and one of the Spatz ladies operated it. Out in back she

made the ice cream in a hand-operated churn. They served ice cream in a dish or in a cone, cones having been introduced at the



*Mrs. Spatz and her son Edwin in front of their ice cream parlor, 1936.*

time of the St. Louis World's Fair. Mrs. Spatz made the toppings, cherry, strawberry, raspberry, mostly from locally available fruit. In the summertime, there was a screen door which opened onto a small porch, and there may well have been two or three tables on the porch. But every time anybody went in or out that screen door would slam, and we could hear it plainly at The Worthy House, two buildings away. I remember once licking off the dasher from a fresh batch of vanilla ice cream, a real treat for a little kid!

### **Captain Brock**

Captain Brock owned the stone house [Roberta Simpson House] nestled between The Worthy House and Spatz Store. It was a rather small stone house. (cont. on page 6)

## ***Reminiscences...***

(cont. from page 5)

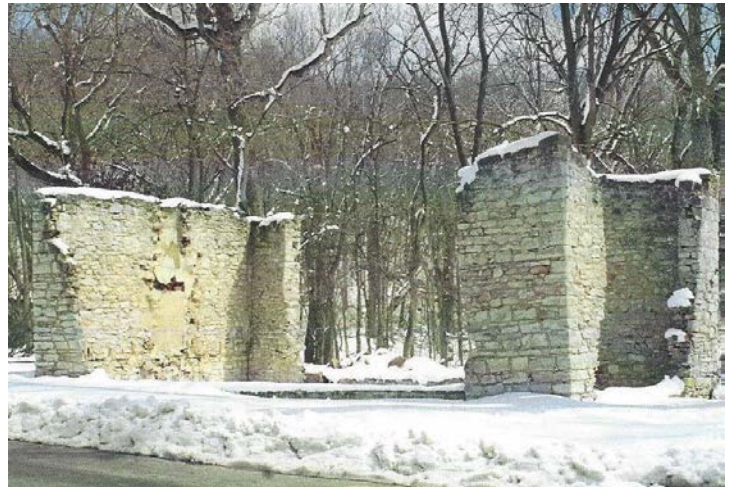
I know virtually nothing of the inside except well on the lower level. Captain Brock was a retired river boatman, and I would have loved to have been old enough to get him to expound on his experiences on the river. Sadly, my only recollection is on a single afternoon. My parents had given me a nickel to go get an ice cream cone. As I passed by Captain Brock's house, he was sitting outside in a rocker on a small stone patio, probably smoking a pipe. I recall he spoke to me and then proceeded to give me a nickel for an ice cream cone. He became my friend for life. On I went to the ice cream parlor, slamming the door behind me and reaching up to the counter for Mrs. Spatz to make me an ice cream cone. I have no idea of what happened to the second nickel. It probably went for another ice cream cone later, but the recollection of Captain Brock giving me a nickel is one of the earliest, specific recollections I have.

### **Ice House**

Today as you come into Elsah, and make the sharp turn to the left (north) [from Mississippi Street onto Mill Street], there is a stone ruin. This was the ice house. I don't recall what it looked like, but it was in service when Mrs. Spatz ran her ice cream parlor. I recall seeing a large chunk of ice put into an insulated chest. It wasn't the same shape as the ice delivered in the city. I was told about how the ice was cut in the river, but I don't know who or when I learned what I know. Apparently, they would drive a team pulling a large sled onto the ice of the river, then saws that resemble those used in cutting down large trees were used to cut blocks of ice several feet long and a couple of feet or more wide. Then with

poles with a spear head and a hook head, they would lift an end of a block out of the water and drag it onto the sled. After they had a couple piles of ice, each slab six or more inches, [I] think, they would drag it off to the ice house and carefully deposit it inside. Lots of sawdust was used, I believe some between each layer. Anyway, it was one of these blocks that I recall. It must have been cold and somewhat scary work on the river. But with a generous supply of sawdust, the ice would keep, hopefully throughout the year.

Now, there's no hint of how the blocks of ice were actually lifted and moved into the ice house, but presumably they were lifted by hooks on a chain attached to a steel track, which served as a runner for the suspended chains. This way blocks could be added or removed. I have always assumed that the blocks of ice were stored horizontally, but I'm not sure that was the case. But I do know that the ice cream parlor depended on river ice.



*The Ice House ruin, preserved.*

## ***HEF to Continue Lincoln Funeral Commemorations***

In the coming year, HEF President Tim Tomlinson and Treasurer George Provenzano will continue their participation in re-enactments of Abraham Lincoln's Funeral. Their work is intended to support finding a permanent home for the museum-quality replica of Lincoln's coffin that the Great Rivers Lincoln History Coalition produced for the 150<sup>th</sup> Commemoration of Abraham Lincoln's Funeral in Springfield, Illinois, in May 2015.



*Tim Tomlinson as Captain Benjamin St. James Fry*

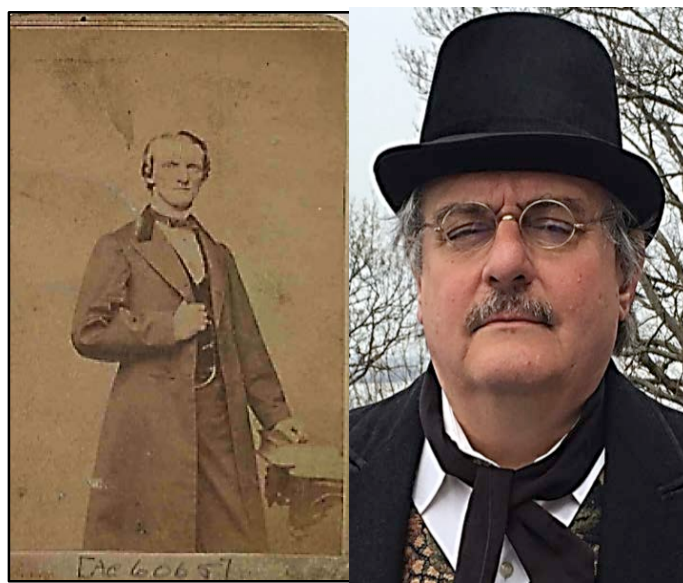
Toward this end, Tim and George continue to research the historic figures whom they re-enact. They recently made some surprising discoveries about the men they portray.

Tim, who re-enacts Captain Benjamin St. James Fry, U.S. Army Chaplain from the 63<sup>rd</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry, learned that for most of the Civil War, the appointment of military ministers rested directly with

President Lincoln. At one point, Lincoln became greatly annoyed with having to review, recommendations, certificates of ordination, etc., for applicants to these posts. On this subject, Lincoln confided to one of his secretaries, "I do believe that our army chaplains, take them as a class, are the very worst men we have in the service."

A few months ago George, who re-enacts Frank Sands, the Washington, D.C., undertaker who helped produce Lincoln's coffin, acquired a photograph of Sands from the Library of Congress. The photo shows Sands without a moustache or spectacles. Who knew? George certainly did not.

*Left: Frank Sands, courtesy of the Library of Congress.  
Right: George Provenzano as Frank Sands.*



## ***HEF Recognized by ACVB for Increasing Tourism in the Great Rivers Region***

Alton Regional Convention & Visitors Bureau presented Historic Elsay Foundation with their Tourism Certificate of Appreciation for 2015 "Best of the Best" in Community Involvement in the tourism market. (cont. on page 8)



## ***HEF Recognized by ACVB***

(cont. from page 7)

HEF received the award during the 2016 Great Rivers Tourism Summit. Over 150 stakeholders from the local tourism industry attended the Summit and CVB's 2015: Year in Review Breakfast at Lewis and Clark Community College on January 21.

Brett Stawar, ACVB President, cited HEF's annual presentation of the Home for the Holidays Christmas House Tour, our work in the Lincoln Funeral Commemoration in Lincoln-Douglas Square in Alton last October, the ongoing Hosmer-Williams Lecture Program in Farley's Music Hall and HEF efforts to restore and preserve the Ice House ruin in Elsah as examples of activities that attract visitors to the Great Rivers Region.



*Pictured below: Ann Badasch, Chair, ACVB Board of Directors (left), and Cory Jobe, Director, Illinois Office of Tourism (far right), present the Tourism Certificate of Appreciation to Connie Davis, proprietor of the Green Tree Inn in Elsah, Marg Doerr, Acting Mayor of Elsah, and George Provenzano, Treasurer, HEF.*

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